

Recognizing Danger Signs in Relationships

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The world is full of violence. Our kids are bombarded with it. Video games, movies, TV and the Internet all contribute. The frightening result is that tweens and teens are becoming desensitized to violence at an age when they are vulnerable.

An increasing number of teens – both male and female – are being victimized by physical attack, rape (or date rape), bullying or stalking in their relationships.

We can help prevent kids from becoming victims. And we can help them protect others. To do this, we need an understanding of what contributes to relationship violence and how they can recognize and respond to the sometimes subtle signs of danger around them.

How Things Are

Boys and girls are different and we raise them differently. Without our intervention, these realities can become contributing factors to violence. It helps to understand that:

- Boys have an external locus of control, meaning they believe the things that happen to them are because of an outside force. (“I’m out because the ump made a bad call.” “The teacher never taught that.”) Consequently, it is difficult for them to take responsibility for their actions.
- Girls have an internal local of control, which causes them to blame themselves for whatever happens. (“I wonder what I did to cause this.” “I really made him mad this time.”)
- Girls are taught to be polite. They are encouraged to avoid hurting other people’s feelings. It can be difficult for them to say “no.”
- Boys are driven toward domination. It’s a natural, testosterone-driven function. Part of the work in developing character involves understanding that tendency,

knowing how to keep it in check and protecting those who are vulnerable.

- For girls, the greatest challenge to developing character is staying true to themselves instead of trying to become what they think others want them to be.
- There is a conspiracy of silence around acts of violence. All people want to feel accepted and connected. The human tendency to avoid pain is greater than our drive to seek pleasure. We don’t like rejection. Consequently, many teens remove the risk of loss by failing to hold others accountable.

What We Can Do

Parent can only protect their children for so long. We must teach them how to do it themselves. The first step takes place before they even encounter a problem. It involves teaching them to pay attention to and respect their intuition.

We all have a voice inside that lets us know when we are in danger. Certain people and situations just don’t feel right. Intuition manifests itself physically first – usually in the stomach – as what many refer to as a “gut feeling.” If we pay attention to the signals, thoughts about what might happen occur. Fear follows. At this point, failing to listen can result in disaster.

- Teach your kids: “If you think something is wrong, it is. Pay attention to what you are feeling. Even if your friends disagree, your feelings are the ones you need to trust.” Give specific examples: “If you walk into a party and feel afraid or funny, walk out!” “If you feel uncomfortable around your best friend’s boyfriend, honor that feeling and keep away.”
- Honor your child’s intuition. If you daughter feels funny about a boy she just met, don’t push with comments like “get

to know him better” or “just give him a chance.”

- Teach girls to say “NO!” Sometimes girls will say “I’m busy” or “I have a boyfriend” to avoid hurting someone’s feelings - even when the person asking them out makes them feel uncomfortable. Rather than offering false hope, girls need to learn to say, “No, thank you.” or “I do not want to go out with you.” Explain that not wanting to hurt someone is really about not wanting to make that person angry.
- If your daughter wonders if she should date someone, have her ask herself: “Would I want my sister (or own daughter) dating him?”
- There is a point at which some relationships need to be ended. Although most of us have raised our children to talk through their problems, don’t perpetuate the fallacy that everything can be talked out.
- Watch your attitude and the messages kids receive. Be careful when telling kids not to be afraid or when making sweeping statements about never judging others. It is important to respect the inner voice that tells us we need to stay away from particular people.
- Help boys learn that they don’t have to dominate just because they can. When they are feeling angry (even with good reason), they need to ask themselves, “Is

this response something I would want to happen to my sister or mother?”

- Teach boys that it is okay to be afraid. Boys need to feel danger to protect themselves.
- Raise girls to understand that they need to listen to their instincts and put themselves first when they are in a relationship. It is crucial that people in a relationship stay separate people with separate minds. Look and listen for clues. If your daughter’s style of dress changes, she may be dressing to please someone else. If you frequently hear “He wants me to ...,” it may be a red flag.
- Teach kids to break the cycle of silence surrounding violence. If they see a friend in a troubled or potentially dangerous relationship, they need to let you (or a guidance counselor) know what is happening.
- Honor your own intuition. If you have a strong negative feeling about someone, you have an obligation to keep your child away.